DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 144 563 IR 005 137

AUTHOR Christenberry, Mary Anne
TITLE Individualizing Course Content in Undergraduate Education: A Contract Plan.
PUB DATE Nov 76
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Congress for Individualized Instruction (Boston, Massachusetts, November 17-19, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Contracts; *Course Content; *Individualized Instruction; Planning; Student Reaction; *Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Role; Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

Contracting for the content of an undergraduate course as one means of individualizing instruction is discussed in this report. It proved to be a successful method for students with wide varieties of background and educational aims in a number of education courses. A personal contract between each student and the instructor is drawn for the duration of the course. The instructor's suggestions for planning this approach to individualized instruction are discussed with advantages, disadvantages, a report of student reactions and opinions, and suggested procedures for implementation of this approach. Both the instructor and the students found that these contracts facilitated learning and considered it a practical demonstration of a good teaching method which has been widely discussed but too-seldom used in undergraduate instruction. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED144563

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

INDIVIDUALIZING COURSE CONTENT IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:

A Contract Plan

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mary Anne Christenberry
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Presented at

the Eight Annual Conference

International Congress for Individualized Instruction

Boston, Massachusetts

November 17-19, 1976

Mary Anne Christenberry, PhD
Department of Education
Augusta College, Georgia

IR005137

INDIVIDUALIZING COURSE CONTENT IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:

A Contract Plan

by

Mary Anne Christenberry, PhD
Augusta College, Georgia

Contracting for the content of an undergraduate course as one means of individualizing instruction is discussed in this report. It proved to be a successful method for students with wide varieties of background and educational aims in a number of education courses at Augusta College. A personal contract between each student and the instructor is drawn for the duration of the course. The instructor's suggestions for planning this approach to individualized instruction are discussed with advantages, disadvantages, a report of student reactions and opinions, and suggested procedures for implementation of this approach. Both the instructor and the students found that these individual contracts facilitated learning and considered it a practical demonstration of a good teaching method which has been widely discussed but too-seldom used in undergraduate instruction.

INDIVIDUALIZING COURSE CONTENT IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: A Contract Plan

by

Mary Anne Christenberry, PhD
Augusta College, Georgia

In teacher education, college teacher-trainers are frequently guilty of not "practicing what they preach." They teach ABOUT individualizing instruction (while lecturing to the whole class), meeting individual needs (while requiring identical behaviors from all members of the class), planning for individual differences (while grading each student according to the same criteria), and taking each learner "where we find him" (while marching lock-step through the syllabus and the textbook). Teacher-trainers may be saying what they truly believe in theory but have not yet learned to put into practice when they do not model the behaviors they are so enthusiastically describing.

Dropping S.A.T. Scores And Grade Inflation

American colleges and universities have been subjected to severe criticism in recent years concerning lowered S;A;T;scores and"grade inflation". The Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported a comparison prepared by the Educational Testing Service that indicates that high school students in 14 of 15 major cities in the United States scored significantly lower than the national averages on the Scolastic Aptitute Tests in 1974-75. (1) However, the same issue of the Chronicle states that while the "downward trend in average scores on the verbal portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test continued this year (1976) there were some signs of improvement in the reading and writing skills of this fall's college freshmen" because the decline in the verbal S.A,T. was not as sharp as last year and there was a "remarkable rise" in scores on achievement tests in English composition, although the significance of this increase is not yet clear. (2) The College Entrance Examination

Board has urged colleges and universities not to lose sight of their commitment to quality education in trying to promote equal educational opportunities for all people. The Board called for "diversity in education, with different levels of instruction for different students."(3) Ben Lawrence, director of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems stated that while present patterns in government financing of higher education threaten the ability of institutions to maintain quality programs because the government may be more concerned with promoting access to education than in promoting excellence, we need to provide "a diversified set of quality programs and centers of excellence in higher education." (4) Lewis B. Mayhew of Stanford University said that government attempts to finance equal access for all students has had a damaging effect on education because of increases in "non-traditional groups" attending colleges and causing new allocations and diluting limited resources for higher education. (5) Steven Muller, President of Johns Hopkins University states that:

> "...even the most critical assessment of declining standards represents no argument against the American experiment of unlimited educational opportunity for all the people. Instead, candid awareness of declining standards argues for a new commitment to regaining the highest possible standards with unrelenting determination." (6)

The college students we find in our undergraduate courses today appear to be less well-prepared, in many instances, for quality programs, yet grades in these college programs have shown an increase during the 1960's and 1970's, leading to some puzzling figures concerning which colleges have been called to account. Sidney Suslow, director of the Office of Institutional Research at the University of California, Berkely, surveyed 50 universities which had received the most federal support in 1975 and found that the number of A's awarded in these institutions more than doubled while the number of C's fell by not quite half from the early 1960's to the early 1970's. While none of the reporting institutions indicated that they planned extensive changes in their

present grading practices, one indicated that it might re-evaluate its criteria for admission to its own graduate school. While Mr. Suslow feels his study is too limited to "allow vigorous analysis or generalization," the institututions gave a broad list of speculations about the causes of grade inflation including "student activism and intensified competition leading to faculty revisionism, resulting in changes in grading practices and policies." (7)

Arvo E. Juala, Michigan State University, the first to document grade inflation about 1974, in a recent nationwide study of undergraduate programs, has found that college gradepoint averages have recently declined for the first time in 10 years. This report, based on data from 135 colleges and universities, indicates that while the actual decline was slight (.022), "it is significant that this decrease represents a marked change from the former pattern of successive increases since 1965 and perhaps since 1960." Mr. Juola indicates that this decline in grade-point averages is directly related to "a new concern in the colleges over grade inflation", and that until 1974, "...Many colleges with high inflation rates were not even aware of the phenomenon." Aware of it now, they are doing something about it and according to Mr. Juola, "about 80 percent of the institutions have taken steps to review or curb inflation,..from simple discussion and study of the problem to specific administrative changes," A promising aspect of Mr. Juola's report is that a comparison indicated that "more colleges were resisting a further reduction in minimal standards and were curbing the persistent rise in high grades." (8) The Chronicle of Higher Education reports a recent rather drastic attempt to combat falling standards at Passaic County Community College (in New Jersey) where about a third of the student body was suspended or put on probation for unsatisfactory performance. (9)

About forty percent of our entering freshmen at Augusta College and in other state institutions in Georgia appear to be ill-prepared to attempt college

work, These students usually begin their college studies with remedial reading, catch-up English, and remedial mathmatics courses. Accused of lowering basic standards, which may be too true in some instances, the problem of the less-qualified but often highly motivated and career-directed student must be dealt with by all of us who teach undergraduate students. We must individualize our courses while still maintaining standards of excellence and scholarship but in ways meaningful and relevant to each of our students. The over-all, "shotgun" method of sending out lots of random but rather related instruction, hoping some of it will "hit home" was never very good pedagogy, but it is even more questionable in this day of increasing diversity and preparation of our students. Contracting for course content is one creative and interesting way of dealing with today's diverse undergraduates.

Development of the Idea

During the Summer Quarter, 1975, at Augusta College (Georgia), an attempt was made to individualize and personalize an undergraduate course in Parent Education through contracting for course content as well as for course grade. The contracts were individually drawn between each student and the instructor and included anticipated grade, tasks agreed to constitute the content of the course for that particular student, and specification of the method of evaluation to be acceptable to both parties of the contract for the course grade. The student had the choice of following the detailed syllabus previously prepared by the instructor..(the syllabus included tasks and topics deemed important by the instructor and included scheduled tests, objectives of the instructor for the students, and competencies the student would be expected to achieve by the conclusion of the course)...or writing a contract with the instructor which might or might not include most of the items in the syllabus.

All but one member of the class chose to follow a contract for the course.

Contracting appeared to be novel to most members of the class. When the instructor explained that each student would have to plan, prepare, and perform tasks worthy of the grade agreed on between instructor and student, the initial reaction was one of bewilderment and anxiety at being asked to do more than comply with instructor-expectations for successful completion of the course. It was possible to contract individually or in connection with two or three other students if their interests were closely related. Two copies of each contract would be signed by both the student and the instructor. The student would keep one copy, the instructor the other. While the instructor stipulated that the contract agreements should be completed by the second week of the quarter, all contracts were open for review and possible revision until the middle of the quarter if this seemed necessary and was mutually agreeable to both student and instructor.

After several suggestions from the instructor concerning ideas they might want to pursue and a period of an hour or so of desperate thought, ideas began to be voiced and "tried out" by a number of the class participants. Some students indicated considerable progress in self-determination during those two hours, an important process promoted in individualized instruction. During the following week, the students conferred with the instructor singly and in small groups to explore ideas, seek direction in focusing vague ideas of interest, to elaborate on other ideas, and to finalize still others. During the quarter, some students made frequent visits to the instructor's office for encouragement, talks, resource materials, to "check-out" ideas, to renegotiate the contract, and for general sharing of ideas, insights, and philosophies. This individual contract outside the classroom facilitated guidance for some students when they got bogged down in their study, became discouraged over some aspect of their stated tasks, or needed encouragement

to pursue a different slant on their interests. The instructor was this able to help each student maintain a higher level of enthusiasm and interest for the tasks agreed on in the contract; something seldom possible in a less personalized course-content class. The student was aware that the instructor was available at all times by appointment or at other times when they dropped by her office if her time was not already committed. This eacy availability of the instructor is an important aspect of this appraoch to education.

The Contracts

The contracts themselves were interesting and diverse and reflected the interests of the individual students. Topics included an investigation of Sudden Infant Death Syndrom (the paper is currently being considered for publication in a leading journal), interviews with parents concerning their veiws toward sex education in the schools, a comparison of the perception of their parents by five-year-olds and by adolescents, a survey of non-parents and their reasons for choosing that status, a group project investigating parent involvement in the classroom and the parents' views toward this involvement, development of a reference file for parental referrals for specific child and/or family-related problems, and many other fascinating and well-thought-out topics.

The Results

The quality of the work which resulted from these contracts astonished the instructor. The class was composed of the usual Summer school variety of classroom teachers renewing certificates, undergraduates taking recommended electives, and individuals who were looking for an evening class! While the contract content varied from rather simplistic to relatively sophisticated reports of mini-surveys and research, the results, in most instances, reflected tremendous amounts of reading, thought, study, and hard work. Several students generated and conducted surveys of attitudes of parents

toward education as part of their projects, and while some of the findings were not original contributions to the field of parent education, they were new to these undergraduate students who discovered them for themselves. Students were encouraged by the instructor to write their papers, if that was part of their contract, with possible publication in mind so that they would carefully document their direct quotations, paraphrases, and sources. The instructor offered assistance if needed and/or wanted and promised to continue to work with the students on the contracted work for possible publication after the quarter was completed, if the student wished.

The Procedure for Individualized Personalized Contracting

The instructor should prepare a syllabus as usual with specified tasks, exam dates, papers required, a reading list, etc. but include a contract form with an explanation of contracting as an option. Competencies to be achieved during the course should be clearly specified along with suggested tasks, readings, topics, and due dates. The contract may include all tasks suggested in the syllabus with the addition of an outline of directions for developing the individual input for the content of the course (see sample contract attached).

During the first two weeks of the course the student should schedule conferences with the instructor and by the third week a mutually agreeable contract should have been entered into, binding to both parties for agree-on materials, tasks, deadlines, quality of work, means of evaluation, etc. The main factor to be kept in mind by all concerned is that all terms of the contract must have been arrived at in complete agreement. It is an open process with the student being free to make valid counter-proposals and give reasons which may be accepted as valid by the instructor, agreed, put in writing, and signed as a binding document. Deadlines as well as tasks are agreed on with

the stipulation that the contracted terms may be renegotiated by a specified date if indicated. Due dates are set far enough from the end of the class period to allow additional time for improving the quality of work presented to the instructor if indicated. If the instructor does not feel that the work of the student is of acceptable quality for the agree-on grade or if the student fails to fulfill the terms of the contract, negotiations may be entered into for either extended time to make the work satisfactory or for a compromise grade to be agreed on.

Advantages of this System

The instructor found the experience of organizing and teaching a class in this manner thoroughly enjoyable. Class discussions were lively and varied points of view were presented. Pressure was lifted from the instructor concerning the assignment of grades. The student shared responsibility for establishing his desired grade as well as choosing his course work to qualify for that grade. This method also appears to have added an incentive for study for some students who had approached the subject with less-than enthusiastic ardor. While those who do not wish to venture out may study during the quarter according to the syllabus, contracting affords other students the opportunity to pursue individual interests without pressures to do something else which may not be as interesting to them.

This method also seemed to give some indication of increased confidence on the part of some students concerning their own abilities. While they were shocked into disbelief at the first mention of expressing what they wanted to study, how they wanted to go about it, and for what grade, students soon found that they were able to identify and successfully approach areas

of interest in this class. In addition, students tended to become much more involved in the subject than if lecture and/or small group work had been the main mode of presentation of the materials for the course. In this case, it is totally the responsibility of the student to produce his own personally and individually-specified evidence of learning.

REACTIONS OF STUDENTS TO THE METHOD

The instructor asked the students to evaluate their feelings about this approach to a class, especially how they felt about contracting for course content as well as for grade. They were asked to assess the amount of learning they felt they had gained by this method as compared to other more traditional methods such as following a syllabus, having tasks already specified, and to react especially to how they felt about taking responsibility for their own learning to a larger degree than usually expected in a Summer School course. The instructor also asked them to indicate whether or not they had ever been under contract in a college class before. All student evaluations of the course were anonymous.

The evaluation of the students in the Parent Education course concerning their opinions about this method of personalized, individualized instruction, were unanimously in favor of the contracts as they wrote them. Some students expressed qualified approval while a few were particularly enthusiastic, recounting their feelings of ease and acceptance in the class. Some felt that much of the tension created by not knowing how one is going to do on a test or how he is going to be evaluated by the instructor if he disagrees with him during a class discussion was nonexistent in this class because of the agreement in the contract. Several members of the class stated that they had worked harder than they had expected to in this class but that they had also learned more than they had anticipated and that they had particularly

enjoyed the opportunity to pursue a study and/or investigation of a topic of special interest to them. While a few of the students had had experience with contracting in classes, these contracts had usually involved agreeing to do "more" from a selection of tasks for specified grades typically instructor-determined and specified. This differed from the approach used in the Parent Education class in that it was up to the individual student to determine his own tasks within the broad guidelines and with the personalized direction of the instructor. While these tasks might, indeed, involve "more", a better grade for the course was not determined by choosing to do more of what the instructor had determined was important, but to specify individually-selected tasks which would involve each student in his own interests.

NEGATIVE POINTS OF THIS APPROACH

Contracting for content and for grades in this manner requires additional time of the instructor and his being "on call" to handle questions and/or problems the student may encounter as he progresses through the quarter. There is also the possiblity of disagreements arising between the instructor and the student concerning difference of opinion regarding the quality of the student's work and even whether he has fulfilled the stipulated tasks of his contract. This method also causes some student-anxiety because few students are accustomed to taking this amount of responsibility for their own class work and learning. Also, some students may take advantage of the system to slide through a difficult course although it is the responsibility of the instructor to plan for avoidance of this eventuality. It requires careful evaluation of the ability and potential of the student by the instructor to enable him to help the student plan realistically. Most students lack experience with self-determination in education, sad to say, so it takes a period of development in organizing the concept of developing his own ideas for course content.

CONCLUSION

The simple method of contracting for content of a course as well as for grade holds the advantage of including the student in determining what he wants to study, how hard he wants to work, how well he can plan for his own learning, and relieves the instructor of the total responsibility of accountability for these two items. Students in the Parent Education course responded enthusiastically to being involved in determining course content and grade and indicated that they would like further opportunity to experience this approach to course planning. The instructor has since conducted three other courses using this method. Each time, the idea of contracting for course content and grade has met with similar enthusiasm and success. It is recommended by both the instructor and her students as a preferred method of organization for many courses in the college curriculum. While not all courses would perhaps be appropriate to this approach, it should be tried when it would be appropriate to extending the learning of students and demonstrating to them that individualizing instruction, meeting individual needs, planning for individual differences, and taking each learner "where we find him", is indeed not only possible, but to be preferred.

Footnotes

(1) "Big City Students Score Poorly on Tests", CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, September 13,1976, vol 13, #2, p. 3.

(2) "Aptitude-Test Scores: Is the Decline Slowing?", CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, September 13, 1976, vol. 13, #2, p. 3.

(3) "Universities are Urged to Reassert Values", CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, Nobemver 1, 1976, vol. 13, #9.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid.

(6) "American Education Standards Are Slipping", TODAY'S EDUCATION, Nov-Dec, 1975, p. 52.

(7) "A's Doubled C's Halved in Decade", published column, source of publication and date unknown (clipping of colleague).

(8) "Undergraduate Average's Dip for First Time in Decade", CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, September 7, 1976, vol. 13, #1, p. 1.

(9) Op. Cit., p. 14.

THE CONTRACT

It is agreed by _____ and by the instructor of EDU 335 that the following tasks will be satisfactorily completed by Wednesday, March 3, 1976, for the grade _____.*

THE TERMS OF THE CONTRACT:

1. I will take the two tests as scheduled in the course outline.

2. I will take the final examination scheduled for Tuesday, March 16 (8-11).

3. I will participate in & contribute to the group project due Monday, March 1.

4. I will read from at least ten (10) sources (books, periodicals, journals, and other reference sources) pertaining to teaching, curriculum planning, and my areas of interest. I will submit reports on these readings to the instructor by Wednesday, March 10.

5. I will submit at least 8 logs to instructor by Monday, March 8.

6. I will confer with the instructor in at least _____individual/group conferences during the quarter concerning plans and progress toward completion of my individual project for the course.

7. I plan to attend at least _____class sessions during the quarter.

8. I will take responsibility for _____of the class session(s) on _____. My topic(s) will be _____. I will prepare _____to hand out to all members of the class.

9. I will provide the following resource speaker _____on _____. Topic _____.

10. All work submitted to the instructor will be typed.

11. I wish to be evaluated for my specified grade by means of _____.

12. Attached is the plan for the individual project I will _____
plan/complete/begin

Note: your project will include:
1. Statement of the problem
2. Your plan
3. Evaluation of your plan
4. Summary

*This contract may be revised and/or renegotiated with the mutual concent and approval of the instructor and the student by _____if the situation warrents.

Signed _____, _____
Student Date

_____, _____
Instructor Date